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Troops Add 'Smart' Cards To Arsenal ID will serve as secure 'passport' to electronic world

By Associated Press

The nation's increasingly high-tech soldiers are getting another computer in their arsenal — this one wallet-sized.

The Pentagon yesterday began arming 4 million troops and civilians with "smart" ID cards that will allow them to open secure doors, get cash, buy food — and soon check out weapons and other military hardware.

The cards, about the size of a credit card, will replace the standard green ID cards now used by Defense employees.

They include a bar code, a circuit chip and a magnetic stripe to store personal information about its holder. With it, soldiers can access secure Defense Web sites, log into their computers, and digitally encrypt and sign their e-mail.

"It is their passport to the electronic world," Defense personnel chief David S.C. Chu said after receiving his card.

Through the Internet — at more than 900 issuance sites — a soldier gets his digital picture taken and his fingerprint stored, and then picks a personal identification number. In about 10 to 15 minutes, he gets his card.

John P. Stenbit, the Pentagon's chief information officer, said the card will help solve the "hurry up and wait" syndrome in the military, where paperwork can bog down processes.

If a card is lost, officials said its digital signatures will be deactivated once the loss is reported, and the employee will get a new card. The government has had a tough time tracking credit cards, The Associated Press noted in August, with at least 15 agencies reporting that they have more issued cards than employees. The smart cards cost the government about \$8 each.

The cards also offer an added security benefit, he said, in the event of an attack similar to the Pentagon crash.

"It's not just 'Gee, that's really neat,'" Mr. Stenbit said, "but if you have an incident, you can tell who's gotten out of the building and who's still stuck in there."

At a computer terminal, soldiers will swipe the card and type in their numerical password. The password provides an extra level of security.

In some months, a soldier will be able to swipe his card to check out a weapon or ammunition, and the card can store his sharpshooting score.

Credit-card-sized smart cards, used extensively in South Africa and Argentina, have taken longer to catch on in the United States. Some large companies, like Sun Microsystems, use them for employee identification. Perhaps the best-known smart card is the "Blue" credit card by American Express.

"We don't seem to have adopted as quickly to this technology, and I'm glad to see us moving forward," Mr. Stenbit said.

The slow pace is partly due to privacy concerns. A plan for a national identification card, proposed by Oracle chairman Larry Ellison and briefly considered by Attorney General John Ashcroft and Sen. Dianne Feinstein, California Democrat, fizzled several weeks ago after privacy groups raised concerns.